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SUBJECT: KARZAI TO THE KING: I NEED YOUR HELP

REF: RIYADH 136

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Classified By: Ambassador James B. Smith for
reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY

[¶](#)11. (C) Afghan President Hamid Karzai traveled to Riyadh for a meeting with Saudi King Abdullah on February 3. Karzai's visit comes a week after his speech at the London Afghanistan Conference, where he called upon the Saudis to assist in facilitating the Afghan reconciliation process. As Karzai seeks attention, the Saudis are playing it cool. FM Saud Al-Faisal's straightforward statement at the London Conference made it clear Saudi involvement would only come with certain conditions. While this statement is fairly straightforward, our discussions with Saudi leaders indicate their actual position may be somewhat more nuanced. While it's unlikely Karzai's visit will result in any real breakthrough, one of their conditions--a formal request for the King to assist--has now been met. END SUMMARY.

FIRST UMRAH, THEN A MEETING WITH THE KING

[¶](#)12. (U) Afghan President Hamid Karzai arrived in Saudi Arabia on February 2, accompanied by the newly named Afghan Foreign Minister, Zalmay Rasoul. He was met at the airport by the Mayor of Jeddah, Prince Mishal bin Majed bin Abdulaziz. Karzai performed the Umrah (minor pilgrimage) in Mecca before traveling to Riyadh, where he was scheduled to have an audience with the King the next day. Afghan Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Aziz Karzai attended all meetings with Karzai. Reuters reported that Karzai had also planned to meet with OIC Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu to discuss an OIC role in reconciliation, but that this meeting was canceled.

KARZAI ASKS FOR HELP

[¶](#)13. (U) Karzai's trip follows his statement at the January 28 London Conference on Afghanistan, where he asked the SAG to "play a role, to guide peace, and assist the process" of reconciliation with the Taliban. FM Saud Al-Faisal's official response was broadly supportive of the reconciliation process, but stopped short of offering any direct Saudi involvement in reconciliation talks. The SAG would continue to support Afghanistan's reconstruction and development, FM Saud said, pledging an additional \$150

million USD in aid (reftel). However, any talks with the Taliban "would be a fruitless exercise" as long as the Taliban leadership still sheltered and supported Al-Qaeda. The Saudis would be willing to assist in mediation at the request of President Karzai; however, the Taliban first had to sever its relationship with Al-Qaeda and cease providing refuge to its leaders.

THE SAUDIS PLAY IT COOL

¶4. (U) President Karzai and his spokespeople have been playing up the trip, making no secret of their plans to ask the King for his help in mediating with the Taliban. Official Saudi media have been more low key, with second page coverage of Karzai's arrival in Jeddah in most major Arabic-language dailies and MFA officials telling us it was simply a "cordial" visit.

MEDIA OPINIONS ARE SPLIT

¶5. (U) The Saudi media appears split as to whether Afghan mediation is a good idea. In a February 2 editorial entitled "Rescue or Entanglement," Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Chief Editor Tariq Al-Humayd urged caution before entering into any further Taliban mediation efforts. He reminded readers that negotiations with the Taliban had faltered in the past, and even the "much admired" former GIP head, Prince Turki Al-Faisal, was unable to convince the Taliban to hand over Osama bin Laden. It was natural for the Afghans to turn to the KSA for help, Al-Humayd continued, but the SAG should be wary of becoming entangled in internal Afghan affairs.

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¶6. (U) In another column in the same newspaper, columnist Mohammed Diab called President Karzai's call for Saudi involvement "long overdue," adding that Saudi Arabia was the country "most capable" of assisting the Afghan reconciliation effort. FM Saud's insistence that the Taliban renounce Al-Qaeda connections was "logical," Diab continued, and the onus was on the Taliban to accept these preconditions and grab this "last chance."

SAUDIS LOOKING FOR "REASONABLE DEGREE OF ASSURANCE"

¶7. (C) In a February 3 meeting with DCM that focused on Iran (septel), Deputy Foreign Minister for Bilateral Relations Dr. Khalid Al-Jindan commented on President Karzai's visit, adding that he and FM Saud had just spoken with Karzai about the challenges facing Afghanistan last week in London. Karzai clearly hoped Saudi Arabia could play a major role in both reconciliation and development. As FM Saud's statement had made clear, the Saudis were willing to help on certain terms. In Al-Jindan's view, the Saudis were "probably willing to play a greater role," but required a "reasonable degree of assurance" that any Taliban elements they engaged with were truly moderates, with no ties to Al-Qaeda. Al-Jindan anticipated that the King and Karzai would discuss Saudi expectations in further detail during their meeting that day.

¶8. (C) In addition, Al-Jindan said the King would likely reiterate the Saudi view that political reconciliation was essential, and that there was "no military solution" to the Afghan problem. It was important to isolate moderate elements of the Taliban and bring them back into the political process; give greater power to the Pashtun community and allow them to return to their "natural" leadership role; and encourage development so that the ordinary Afghan would have a "reason to opt for peace." They

were concerned with government corruption, Al-Jindan continued, but there was a need to distinguish between "worthwhile expenditures" aimed at gaining loyalty of certain tribes and actual corruption in the Afghan context.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) Karzai and his spokespeople have been playing up the visit, making no secret that he plans to ask for the King's support in mediating with the Taliban. FM Saud's statement at the London conference remains the definitive official Saudi position: the Saudis support reconciliation and would be willing to assist at the request of President Karzai; however, the Taliban must sever its relationship with Al-Qaeda and cease providing refuge to its leaders. While this statement is fairly straightforward, the Saudi position behind the scenes may be more nuanced. Al-Jindan's assessment that the Saudis need a "reasonable degree of assurance" suggests the Saudis may be more flexible than they are willing to publicly appear. As usual, they appear to be holding their foreign policy cards close to the chest.

¶10. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: While Karzai's trip is unlikely to result in any major breakthrough, the fact he visited and very publicly asked the King officially for his help does satisfy one of the Saudis' criteria for engagement. Post will follow up with the Afghan Embassy in Riyadh for additional details of the visit next week. END COMMENT.

SMITH